Failures in American Diplomacy: The Suez Crisis, 1956
Amerikan Diplomasisinde Başarısızlık: Süveyş Krizi (1956)

Larry Hart*

Özet


Anahtar kelimeler: Süveyş Krizi, Cemal Abdul Nasır, Eisenhower, 1956, Orta Doğu

Abstract

In October 1956 Great Britain, France and Israel attacked Egypt over control of the Suez Canal. The allies believed Egypt’s actions violated the 1888 principles regarding control and use of the waterway. The United States played a role in the mediation of the parties. It is widely believed that the Eisenhower administration’s influence prevented more conflict and stood up to the Soviet intrusion into the area. The evidence shows that this was not the case. In fact, it was American failures in diplomacy which brought about the crisis in the first place, created the pathway for Soviet adventurism into this vital area, and inevitably caused a war between the nations involved. In effect America’s interest was dedicated to damage control of the situation rather than the peaceful resolution of the issue. This essay argues that American failures were the main cause of the Suez Crisis in 1956, and was the primer for more instability and war in the region long after the Eisenhower administration had ended.

Key words: Suez Crisis, Gamal Abdul Nasser, Eisenhower, 1956, Middle East

* California State University, Northridge - USA
The Suez Crisis in 1956 was one of the first real tests of the Cold War to take place outside of Europe. U.S diplomacy went through two phases concerning this issue. The Americans tried to broker an agreement between the belligerent parties to avoid a possible military confrontation that might lead to an escalating war. And, after war did break out, diplomatic solutions concentrated on withdrawal of the French, British and Israelis with some kind of compromise on the use of the Canal. No doubt, American moves were influenced by the envious relationship the Soviets seemed to enjoy with the Egyptians complicated by the irritating fact that the Soviets were only in Egypt because of American diplomatic failures. When war appeared inevitable foreign relations documents even suggest that President Eisenhower considered putting our forces on alert against our own allies in an attempt to intimidate them not to start a war with Egypt.

Some have argued that Eisenhower's approach to pressuring French, British and Israeli forces to withdraw from the Canal Zone was designed to attract the Arab states, particularly Egypt, closer to the American sphere and away from the Soviet Union, but in actuality American moves drove these states further still into the realm of Soviet influence. Admitted “bonehead” historical mistakes concerning the Egyptians exacerbated the Suez Crisis and narrowly escaped a super power confrontation over a regional dispute. This essay will argue that American diplomacy was extremely short sighted when it came to Egypt and how to handle its leader. The Suez Crisis was a lesson in how not to practice American diplomacy.¹

The debacle began with the Egyptians desiring weapons to bolster their army against Israel. Col. Gamal Abdul Nasser, who had come to power in a military coup in 1952, had maintained a belligerent stance with Israel ever since. When Israel launched a massive retaliatory strike into Gaza to remove terrorist infiltrating elements with punishing results, Nasser began to push for more arms. He would have preferred American weapons to Soviet, but John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State, decided along with his boss, President Eisenhower, against it. Consequently, Egypt concluded an arms deal with Czechoslovakia in September 1955 marking the beginning of Soviet involvement in the Middle East.

Nasser continued to hope for some kind of an American conciliation as he recognized the importance of Western influence. Even after the Eisenhower administration rejected Nasser’s request for American armaments and Egypt already had an understanding with the Soviets through their satellite, Czechoslovakia, Nasser told Undersecretary of State, Herbert Hoover, Jr., that he “had faith in Secretary Dulles and easily accepted (the) suggestion (that) should he have (the) opportunity of talking directly with (the) Secretary something profitable (from) both sides would

¹ The mistakes made by the Eisenhower administration on this particular issue were costly and continual. 1) Eleven years later the Six Day War can be argued was an outgrowth of Eisenhower’s diplomatic mistakes made during the Suez Crisis. 2) The fact that this was the one and only time during the Cold War that the United States voted along with the Soviet Union against its own allies in the United Nations because American diplomacy could not foresee the magnitude of these diplomatic actions working against American interests in the region. 3) Maybe the most crucial of all consequences, America not helping Nasser at least with token gestures to keep him in the American sphere sent him right into the arms of the Soviet Union. A relationship that lasted seventeen years bringing war and violence to the Middle East, making absolutely impossible any chance for a peaceful settlement between the Arab States and Israel.
be forthcoming.”  But, even as this second chance availed itself, Dulles and Eisenhower decided against trying to win Egypt back into Western influence.

Dulles would admit later that it was big mistake not to supply Nasser with the arms he needed. By doing so the Suez Crisis might have been averted. Historically regarded as a diplomatic error of the highest order, Eisenhower was determined not to repeat as this issue moved forward. Secretary Dulles went to work trying to earn Nasser’s friendship. The result of which was a promise from the U.S, the English and the World Bank to fund the building of the Aswan High Dam, a project to enhance Egypt's electrical supply, and a must if Egypt were to ever count itself among modern nations. Like the weapons issue, Nasser had preferred to be granted the loan for the dam from Western sources. However, in the ensuing months after the promise was made, Dulles lost faith in Nasser as Egypt took a series of steps that appeared almost designed to see how far the Americans were willing go in supporting Nasser’s actions, which were obviously opposed to American interests. After undermining the Baghdad Pact by signing the arms agreement with the Soviets, he further strengthened his hand in the region by signing a military alliance with Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen and rejected any peace with Israel on the lines of the Alpha plan, the Anglo American 1950s attempt to solve the Arab Israeli dispute.

But for the Eisenhower administration, opposition to helping Egypt was not only precipitated by Nasser’s actions. One of the benefits of the Aswan High Dam would be the proliferation of the cotton industry in Egypt. This fact drew protests from American cotton growers inside the United States. According to diplomatic historian John Lewis Gaddis in “We Now Know,” American Southern cotton growers insisted that building the dam would create a glut of cotton on the world market, dropping the price and thereby causing a significant loss to American southern cotton growers. Congress essentially agreed with this assessment. For Secretary Dulles, the thought of oil shipments at the mercy of a military dictator like the risk-taking Nasser was not a very good prospect for the future. That fact compounded by sabotaging the American cotton industry convinced the Eisenhower administration to go back on their word about supporting Egypt’s efforts to build the Aswan High Dam financially. On July 19, Dulles called in his Egyptian counterpart and informed him that financing from the dam would not come from American capital.

---

2 Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-57, Vol XVI, September 27, 1955, Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, John P. Glennon ed., 1989, Telegram from the Department of State to the Mission at the United Nations, 521. Some scholars have suggested that Nasser’s invitation to the Americans was nothing more than playing the two sides against each other. If this was the case, Nasser had no intention whatsoever of relinquishing any agreement with the Soviets even if he would get American weaponry.

3 FRUS 1955-1957, 519. Dulles’s actual words were “it will be regarded as a major defeat.” This is according to the MacMillan conversation.

4 FRUS, 1955-1957, In a letter from the embassy in Cairo to the Department of State, July 30, 1956, 55. “[Nasser] long ago had given me his preferred priority list as regards High Dam. 1st choice was through the World Bank and United States and UK”.

5 John Lewis Gaddis, We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History (Oxford University Press, 1997), 171

Nasser was furious. In response, one week later on July 26, 1956, he announced that he was nationalizing the Suez Canal in order to raise the funds to pay for the dam. There had been speculation that Nasser’s decision might have been in collusion with the Soviet Union but the evidence does not show that to be the case. Rather he made the decision to nationalize the canal on his own, but “with confidence that he would receive Soviet approval and support.” Nasser gave assurances to the French and the British that he would keep the canal open to all shipping. But, the English and the French were as suspicious as Secretary Dulles. They did not trust Nasser to keep his word.

The nationalizing of the canal set off a flurry of memos between the U.S and its allies. In England, within minutes the ambassador to the United States was called into an emergency meeting with Prime Minister Anthony Eden. As the ambassador relates in a message to the State Department the “Cabinet takes an extremely grave view of the situation and very strong feelings were expressed, especially by Eden to (the) effect that Nasser must not be allowed to get away with it.” Pierre, the foreign minister of France, said “The French Government takes a most serious view of the affair and likens it to seizure of the Rhineland by Hitler.” British Prime Minister Eden spelled out in a letter to President Eisenhower that allowing Egypt to continue on its present path with regard to the Canal, could not be sanctioned by the free world, citing its importance as a European shipping lane for not only oil but as a thoroughfare for ships traveling west into the Mediterranean and from the Mediterranean to all points east. While not trusting Nasser to keep his word to allow ships unlimited use of the Canal, Eden was also concerned that Egyptian management would not have the capability to oversee the daily operations properly. This was untenable to the British and the French. Eden called for as much political pressure the free world could bear on Egypt to relent on this issue and return it to western operation and if that did not work then England would have to resort to force, telling the president, “My colleagues and I are convinced that we must be ready, in the last resort, to use force to bring Nasser to his senses. For our part we are prepared to do so.”

Eisenhower wanted no part of a military solution and about a week later declared during a news conference:

---

9 FRUS: Vol. XVI, July 27 1956 Telegram from the Embassy in the United Kingdom to the Department of State, 4.
10 FRUS: Telegram From the Embassy in France to the Department of State, Vol. XVI, July 27, 1956, 8.
11 FRUS 1955-1957 Vol XVI,11. This is where the Eisenhower administration broke with its allies over this issue and would from this point on move further and further away from the European camp to eventually stand against England, France and Israel, on the side of Egypt and the Soviet Union in the United Nations.
The United States is committed to a peaceful solution of this problem, and one
that will insure to all nations the free use of the canal for the shipping of the
world, whether in peace or in war, as contemplated by the 1888 convention.  

On September 11th, during a news conference Eisenhower once again indicated the desire of the
United States to find a peaceful solution to this issue. He implied that America would not back
Britain and France in case of war. America will “not go to war ever, while I am occupying my
present post, unless the Congress is called into session, and Congress declares such a war.”

Clearly, the Americans did not want this situation to be solved by violent action. Dulles
had remarked that the U.S. would not “try to shoot its way through the Canal.  
Because of this
position they were left out of the war plans being made by Britain and France with Israel.
However, the Eisenhower administration was not totally surprised when war broke out. As early as
September 5, Eisenhower recognized that the allies were running out of options. In the summary
of developments of the Suez Situation:

In the event of Nasser’s rejection of the 18-nation proposal, we question the
value of bringing the matter before the Security Council (SC). However, the
British are considering this as an “exercise” which must be gone through before
more drastic measures are undertaken. We believe that if the matter is brought to
the SC, it must be for the purpose of sincerely seeking a peaceful solution, but we
recognize that a resolution meeting the minimum demands of the canal uses is not
likely to be adopted by the SC because of the Soviet veto. Further, incidents in the
canal would probably precipitate a showdown while the matter was under
consideration in the SC.

The quote above shows that the Eisenhower administration knew of the inevitability of the
allies doing something drastic about the Canal situation. Allowing Nasser to control the Canal was
tantamount to him dictating terms over Europe. It can be argued that as much as Eisenhower

---

13 Public Papers of the Presidents, Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1956, 756.
15 For an explanation on the 18 nation treaty, see, Public Papers of the Presidents, Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1956,192. 
Set up by the Americans to bring together all the nations that benefit by using the Suez Canal. According to Dulles there
were 22 nations, but at the conference held in London only 18 came. This was enough in Dulles’s view, and the
president agreed with him. The purpose of the conference was to bolster and support the provisions that were set down at
the 1888 convention governing of the usage of the canal.
17 I would posit that the U.S. and its European allies mistrust of Nasser’s actions stems historically from his treatment
concerning Israel, 1) the numerous violations he committed regarding the Armistice Agreement of 1949, and 2) his
seemingly endless excuses to the Mixed Armistice Commission over the mounting Fedayeen attacks from Nasser’s rise
to power in 1952 until late 1955 when Israel launched the raid into Gaza as a reprisal which marked the beginning of the
Suez Crisis. Refer to page two of this paper. “When Israel had launched a massive retaliatory strike into Gaza to remove
terrorist infiltrating elements with punishing results, Nasser began to push for more arms.” This history was not lost on
opposed any kind of hostile action against Egypt, his subsequent efforts to quell the war talk among the allies was due in large part to his realization that it was American mistakes that led to the crisis in the first place. Now that the relevant documents are available it appears he could not get away from the fact that it was his own administration’s blunders that led to the brinkmanship that was building through the months of September and October, 1956.

The evidence by the middle of October suggests that with the buildup of Israeli forces on the Sinai border, the Eisenhower administration knew that the war was about to begin. Dulles had been informed no later than October 19th by CIA information that there was a Franco-Israeli coordinated intention. However, intelligence showed that the invasion would not take place until after Election Day. It is not clear if the intended invasion date was simply missed-intelligence or intended to confuse the Americans. But, as the day approached American information would get more precise. Eisenhower continued to try to stop any action up until the time it started. In a letter to Prime Minister Ben-Gurion of Israel, the President expressed his displeasure with the Israeli moves. “I must frankly express my concern of reports of heavy mobilization on your side,” Eisenhower wrote on October 27, two days before the initiation of hostilities.

The Americans were convinced that war was imminent as the mobilization issue within Israel was discussed at the State Department the next day. In the meeting on October 28, Secretary Dulles speculated that several factors known to Israel made the situation conducive to begin military action, the Suez dispute, the situation in Jordan (referring to Iraqi troops gathering inside Jordanian sovereign territory) and the American elections (slated for the following week).

To force Nasser to relinquish his control of the Suez Canal, Israel attacked on October 29th with the British and the French entering the war on the next day. The Eisenhower administration, though not surprised, remained opposed to the action. “We believe these actions to have been taken in error.” The problem with the Soviets, peace in the area, and danger to American interests were all factors considered by the administration. They took their case to the United Nations and immediately called for a ceasefire.

We went to the United Nations with a request that the forces of Israel return to their own land and that hostilities in the area be brought to a close.

The allies had acted on their own initiative. “The United States was not consulted in any way about any phase of these actions. Nor were we informed of them in advance.” It was the Americans, the British and the French, and probably confirmed that he was not a leader who could be trusted with something as vital to Western interests as the Suez Canal.

18 Herman Finer, Dulles over Suez: The Theory and Practice of his Diplomacy (Chicago: Quadrangle Books. 1964), 334. Election Day was scheduled for November 5th.
19 FRUS: Message from President Eisenhower to Prime Minister David Ben Gurion, Vol. XVI, October 27, 1956, 795.
21 Public Papers of the Presidents, Dwight D. Eisenhower, 19561060-1065.
22 Public Papers.1060-1065.
23 Public Papers, 1060-1065. All of these quotes coming from entry 282 are the result of a televised message to the nation that Eisenhower gave on October 31, two days after the initial Israeli invasion. Eisenhower had two reports to bring to the people that night. He also reported on the events in Eastern Europe, remarking that “Hungary is rising from...
imperative for the Eisenhower administration to forestall Soviet involvement. However, their actions might have worked in reverse from what they were intended. At the United Nations Security Council meeting on October 30, Ambassador Lodge spoke by condemning Israel for this action. “He called on the Council to find a breach of the peace, to order a cease-fire, and to instruct the Israeli forces to withdraw behind the frontiers as established in the armistice agreements.”

Lodge also demanded that U.N. members “refrain from giving assistance to which might continue to prolong hostilities.” This is a clear call to the French to stop selling arms to Israel, that country’s main supplier of military equipment in the 1950s.

Charging Israel with violating the armistice of 1949, and not condemning Egypt also, presented ambiguities in American foreign policy. In July, it will be remembered that Secretary Dulles had not felt comfortable with Nasser’s moves to try to play both the Americans and the Soviets off each other. Consequently, Egypt had been denied American assistance in building the Aswan High Dam. With Lodge's condemnation of Israel, it looked as if American policy was shifting to the Egyptian and Soviet side of the argument. For our allies it was a disappointing confirmation of what they had expected from American diplomacy in recent weeks. The U.S. was not consulted when plans were made to resolve the crisis by force. This drove a further wedge between the already deteriorating situation between the Western allies. As a result, this unclear direction of foreign policy was not lost on the Soviets who increased both their rhetoric and support for Nasser’s Egypt. “The Russians regarded the Security Council proceedings as a victory for themselves and Egypt.”

Embracing the American position as “warmly welcomed” the Soviets feeling relatively free to act without reprisal would soon make demands on the allies, which could only be interpreted as threats of war.

However, American actions were not without some foundation. Eisenhower sincerely felt the situation could be resolved peaceably and thereby prevent possible further encroachment by the Soviets. When the full extent of the war was known, its planning, subterfuge and execution, Dulles and Eisenhower became livid. The following relates the American anger, indignation and insult felt by this action:

Here are two of our great allies and one small and almost insignificant nation, all of them being assisted by us, militarily and economically, and they are flouting us, showing contempt for us by their action or speeches. They have betrayed us...It is criminal that Britain and France and Israel should involve us without our
permission or concurrence. Of course they think no doubt, that if they get into trouble the United States would come to their help and bail them out.\textsuperscript{28}

The General Assembly with full American compliance responded by passing a resolution on November 2\textsuperscript{nd}, which called for all parties to “withdraw all forces behind armistice lines...desist from raids across the armistice lines to neighboring territory, and...observe scrupulously the provisions of the Armistice Agreements.”\textsuperscript{29}

The next day a meeting was held at the Department of State between the Ambassadors of Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia with the Undersecretary of State.\textsuperscript{30} The main message of this meeting was the concern of the Arab world over the invasion. Arab governments friendly to the United States demanded to know what would happen if the belligerents refused to comply with the November 2\textsuperscript{nd} resolution.

The Arab countries could not wait indefinitely...The whole world was boiling over...The Arab governments were now restraining their populations, giving the United States time to bring about a just solution.”\textsuperscript{31}

The American concern was twofold, the probability of escalation in the Arab world leading to more instability in the region and a direct confrontation with the Soviet Union. Because the American position in the United Nations did not side with its allies, the Soviets took the advantage and sent threatening messages to all three participants in the war. The Soviet Defense Minister Nikolai Bulganin boldly threatened both Britain and France by saying “We are full of determination to crush the aggressor and reestablish peace in the East by using force.” He then warned Prime Minister Ben-Gurion of Israel that he hoped the government of Israel would “come to its senses before it is too late.”\textsuperscript{32} That was followed up on November 6\textsuperscript{th} by an ominous message taken from the American embassy in Cairo. It read:

…reports from Egyptian ambassador (in) Moscow and Kisselev (Soviet ambassador to Egypt) here convince(d) Sabri (unknown Egyptian liaison) (that the) Soviets (are) prepared go all the way in knowledge (of) risking third world war.\textsuperscript{33}

This was taken very seriously and raised the specter of an enlarged war. As we now know from the book by the same title, John Lewis Gaddis points to the blustering of Khrushchev as nothing more than an act but the allies had no way of knowing that at the time.

\textsuperscript{28} Finer, \textit{Dulles Over Suez}, 371.

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{FRUS: Editorial Note}, Vol. XVI, November 1, 1956, 933.

\textsuperscript{30} Dulles was not present as he was in the hospital recuperating from an illness.

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{FRUS: Visit of Group of Arab Ambassadors to Under Secretary}, Vol. XVI, November 3, 1956, 950-951. These were the comments made to Undersecretary Hoover to describe their own populations.

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{FRUS: Soviet Maneuvers on the Middle East Situation; Franco-American Relations}, Vol. XVI, November 5, 1956, 1003 n2.

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{FRUS: Telegram From Embassy in Egypt to the Department of State}, November 6, 1956,1028.
This was an empty gesture: it was a cheap way of rattling the West while winning favor with the Arabs. Nasser had admitted privately that it had been the Americans, not the Russians, who defeated Anglo-French-Israeli aggression. But the actual cease-fire followed Khrushchev’s fulminations closely enough to suggest a cause and effect relationship, and many people at the time—especially in Europe and the Middle East—saw it that way.34

Khrushchev never had any serious intention of starting a war. At the time however, with their problems in Hungary precipitating some direct action, and the apparent unwillingness of the United States to act decisively on the side of the allies, Khrushchev speculated he might advance Soviet interests by practicing brinkmanship. For the United States, it might have suspected that it was not a real threat but the seriousness of it prevented diplomacy from taking the chance of viewing it that way. They had to take all provocations, diplomatic, political and military at face value. Therefore, these messages that came from the ambassador in Egypt were taken very seriously. The fact that policy did not reflect support for our allies and allowed the Soviet “blustering” to take place was beside the point. The U.S moved its forces to a status of “increased readiness” on November 6th.35 One can assume that it was done with the idea of showing the Soviet Union a strong commitment toward American interests. However, the original memorandum, which was recorded on October 29th, calls for the same “list of actions” in direct reaction to the movement of Israeli forces ready for attack. No mention of any Soviet threat exists in this memorandum indicating an American show of force toward an allied move on Egypt. There is one small note with reference to the enforcement of the “list of actions” in the second memorandum, which I submit for speculation:

(3) Not printed. The message to certain Unified and Specified Commanders directed that they exercise special vigilance in light of the recent Soviet notes. (JCS files)36

In a conversation between the French ambassador and acting Secretary of State Hoover, the French expressed their concern of a possible attack from the Soviet Union. “The French

34 Gaddis, We Now Know, 173.
35 FRUS: Telegram from Joints Chief of Staff to Certain Specified and Unified Commanders, Vol. XVI, November 6, 1956,1036.
36 FRUS: Telegram from Joints Chief of Staff to Certain Specified and Unified Commanders, Vol. XVI, November 6, 1956,1035 n3. Within the context of the mobilization of American forces to the Middle East, this is the only time the Soviets are mentioned in the two memorandums, here and the initial "list of actions" in FRUS: Memorandum From the Secretary of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Wentworth) to the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff (Radford), Vol. XVI, October 29, 1956,826. It should be stressed that this was a note added by the editor of this document. Since it is “not printed” we can assume one of two scenarios. One, that this was the editor’s own feeling about the American move. Two, the end of the note reads parenthetically "(JCS files)" indicating that the editor took the note from the files of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In either case, it could be concluded that Eisenhower indeed prepared for a show of force against our allies but because of the course of events through October sent that prepared force to cover against any brinkmanship played by the Kremlin.
government…cannot exclude the possibility of an attack by the Soviet Union against the UK and France.”

The Acting secretary, in reply, said he fully recognized the importance of the French Government’s message. He emphasized that the only way to get the situation back on the tracks was for the French and British Governments to accept unequivocally and unconditionally the UN resolution calling for a cease fire, with the withdrawal of forces, and the acceptance of a UN police force.

Due to the intransigence from the positions of both sides, American and the allies, during the first two weeks of October 1956, “effective communication among the three principals appears to be breaking down…estrangement from the United States was cumulative but steady.”

Certainly, the mobilization of American military power was meant to remind the Soviets that the U.S. could only be pushed so far. But critical analysis of this diplomacy shows that it might have had a double purpose. Along with the Soviet threat the U.S. also sent a message to its three allies. Would Eisenhower have gone to war against France, Britain and Israel over the Suez conflict? That is highly doubtful, but it is entirely possible that the Americans might have, like the Soviets, practiced some brinkmanship over the issue. However, since the Soviets had already succeeded in sufficiently making France, Britain and Israel feel in jeopardy, the U.S. role turned out to be the protector that NATO had demanded them to be anyway.

Whether through the diplomatic pressure applied by the United States, the condemnation of the United Nations, or the more than veiled Soviet threats of retaliation, a cease-fire went into effect the next day on November 7th. It would be another month before an agreement was in place to withdraw French and British forces. Israel would take longer than that. On December 3rd British Foreign Affairs Secretary Selwyn Lloyd announced in the House of Commons the intention to withdraw British and French forces “without delay.”

This marked the first time that the U.S. actually came head to head with the Soviets outside of Europe. Because of this crisis it could be posited that any prestige Soviet adventurism in the Middle East could gain in the world, would lessen American influence. American diplomacy on this issue gave the Soviets the leverage to make those gains and hand the United States that loss of influence. In conclusion, Eisenhower’s handling of the crisis marked some dismal mistakes in United States diplomatic history.

---

37 FRUS Vol. XVI: Message from the French Government to the President, November 6, 1956, 1023.
38 FRUS, Vol. XVI, 1024. The French had previously express through two different diplomatic channels urging the United States government to respond according to the provisions of the North Atlantic Treaty, in order to thwart any further Soviet threat. But America failed to do so. In Hoover’s comments to Ambassador Alphand he never mentioned anything about the treaty. Hoover also failed to mention anything about the American status of readiness, which had been previously upgraded.
40 FRUS: Telegram From the Embassy in the United Kingdom to the Department of State, Vol. XVI, December 2, 1956.
The question historians will continue to ask, could Soviet influence have been diminished if the US had granted arms to Egypt or had funded Nasser’s Aswan High Dam project? In hindsight one could surely draw a different history in the area if either one of these had been so. Certainly, this would have been true of the conflict with Israel. Secretary Dulles apparently thought so. He felt that if the work would keep Nasser busy for fifteen years or so “he might not be so restless and bellicose elsewhere. Peace would very probably be promoted by the building of the Dam.” 41 The fact that Eisenhower and Dulles “came down, with instant decisiveness, on the side of the Egyptians” as John Gaddis puts it, would come back to haunt American diplomacy in coming years. 42

To the delight of the Soviets, in the end the French, the British and the Israelis, clearly allied with the west, were chastised by American diplomacy, even to the point of a possible military confrontation and forced to make a humiliating withdrawal. By leaving Nasser in power, the world would be compelled to reckon with him again. In fact, less than eleven years later Israel went to war against Egypt and the specter of a superpower confrontation was immensely larger than it had been in 1956. Of course, by that time President Lyndon Johnson had learned from the mistakes of the Suez Crisis and backed Israel against Egypt with stunning military and historical results.

41 Finer, Dulles Over Suez, 37.
42 Gaddis, We Now Know, 173.
Bibliography


